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AUTHOR Dean, Roger A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Organizational socialization is the process by which a person learns the values, norms, and required behaviors that allow an individual to function as a member of an organization. The individual has expectations of job content, job context, and career expectations. Reality shock occurs when a newcomer's expectations differ from experiences in the organization. The hypothesis that reality shock negatively influences organizational commitment and commitment-related behaviors was tested in a longitudinal field study conducted at a large accounting firm. Subjects (N=162) were new accountants. A questionnaire was administered on the first day of employment to assess pre-employment expectations. A second questionnaire measuring perceptions was administered one year later. The accountants reported significant levels of reality shock. Results supported the hypothesis that the extent of reality shock experienced does impact the employee's organizational commitment, attitudes, intentions, and behavior. Correlations between reality shock measures and organizational commitment measures were negative. The results also indicated that older newly-hired accountants were more committed than were younger accountants, and those from blue collar families were more committed than were those from upper class, professional families. (ABL)

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REALITY SHOCK: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A NEW JOB DOESN'T MATCH EXPECTATIONS*

By

Roger A. Dean, Ph.D.
School of Commerce, Economics, & Politics
Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia 24450
703/463-8610

Kenneth R. Ferris, Ph.D., and
Constantine Konstans, Ph.D., CPA
Edwin L. Cox School of Business
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275
214/692-2000

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REALITY SHOCK: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A NEW JOB DOESN'T MATCH REALITY

ABSTRACT

Reality shock occurs when a new employee's expectations, formed prior to joining an organization, differ significantly from what is experienced by that employee after working in the organization. This research found that newly hired accountants do in fact experience reality shock, and that this reality shock has a negative impact upon their commitment to the organization. Commitment is defined as including the employee's attitudes towards the organization, intentions to remain working for the organization, and job performance.

Organizational socialization has been defined partly as the process by which a person learns the values, norms, and required behaviors that permit the individual to function as a member of an organization; and partly as the process by which an individual learns what outcomes will be received by organizational members [Dean, 1983]. This definition, in short, sees socialization as a two-way process of establishing expectations -- the individual learns what the organization expects from its members, and at the same time learns what the members can expect from the organization.

The individual's expectations can be separated into at least three categories: job content expectations, job context expectations, and career expectations. The first two types of expectations relate to the specific job that the employee will be doing, and to the climate in which the employee works, a distinction made first by Herzberg [1966]. Career expectations are those perceptions that an individual has about his or her future career. These include (a) expectations regarding promotions, intraorganizational mobility (both lateral and vertical moves), opportunities for progression into middle and upper management, pay progressions, and organizational assistance with career planning; and (b) expectations regarding interorganizational mobility -- that is, the extent to which a position in this organization will enable the individual to obtain a desired position in another organization at some future time.

This broad definition of socialization recognizes that the individual may acquire these expectations sometime prior

to entering the organization. This "pre-entry" socialization can be influenced by numerous societal stereotypes (Van Maanen, 1976, notes such stereotypes about police work); by childhood experiences (Dean, 1981, notes that a child visiting a bank may attach unrealistic status to the role of a bank teller); through professional training [Fox, 1957; Miller and Wager, 1971]; and via the organization's recruitment, selection, orientation, and placement processes [Dean and Wanous, 1984; Wanous, 1976; Gomersall and Myers, 1966].

Reality Shock

Reality shock occurs when a newcomer's expectations, established prior to joining the organization, differ from what is experienced upon entering the organization. This research is concerned with the effect of reality shock on the organizational commitment of professionals.

Steers [1977] has found three antecedents of organizational commitment: (1) personal characteristics (age, education, personality, past work experiences, etc.); (2) job content (task identity, optional interaction, feedback, etc.); and (3) job context (group attitudes, organizational dependability, etc.). These factors interact to influence organizational commitment.

Dean [1983] has extended Steers' formulation by including the effect of reality shock on commitment. An individual joins an organization with expectations regarding job content, job context, and career facilitation. Dean [1983] hypothesizes that reality shock, occurring when these expectations differ

from what is actually experienced, negatively influences the employee's commitment to the organization. Figure 1 illustrates this hypothesis.

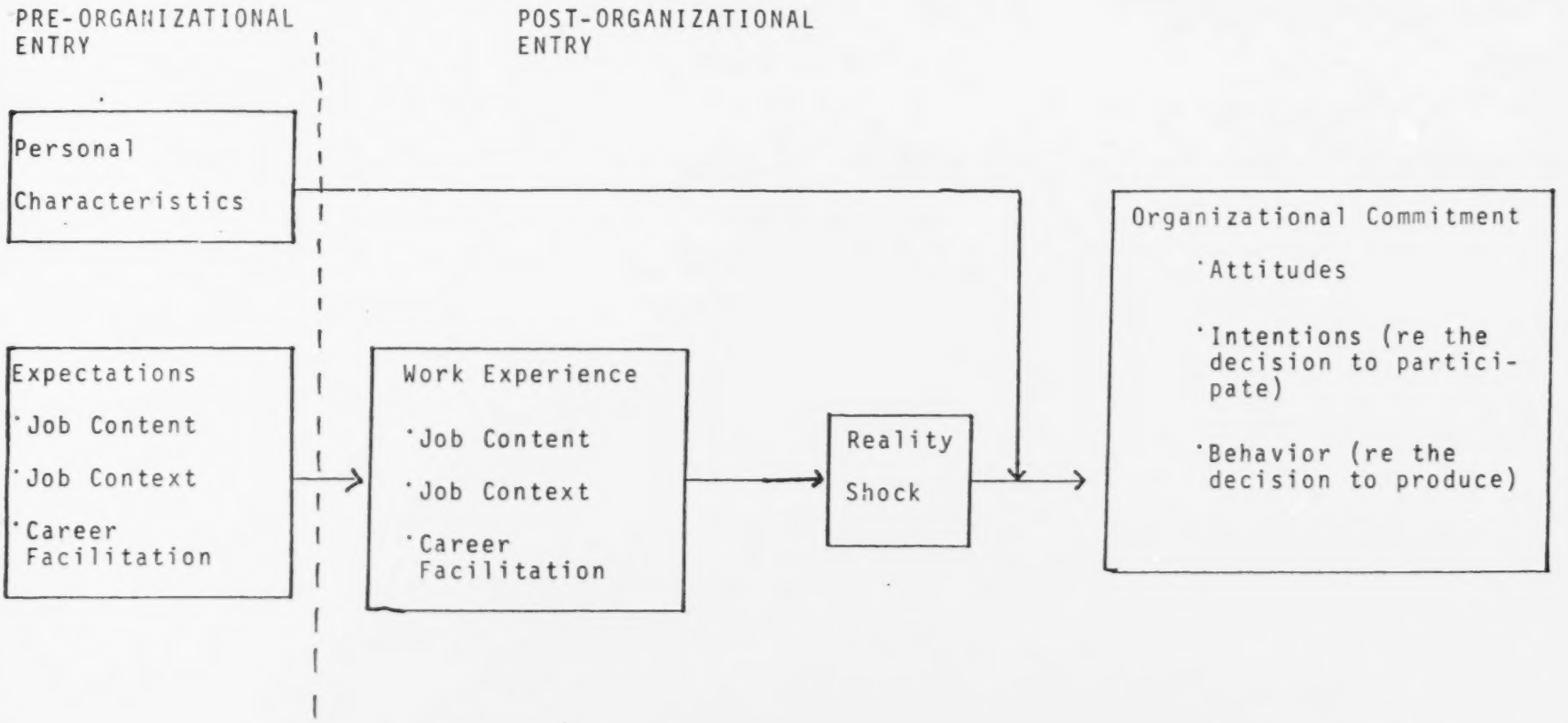
The Effects of Reality Shock

The purpose of this research was to measure the reality shock existing on job content, job context, and career facilitation dimensions for professional accountants, and to test Dean's hypothesis that reality shock negatively influences organizational commitment and commitment-related behaviors. Specifically, the study addresses the following hypotheses:

1. New employees entering the accounting profession have job expectations that are not confirmed by their work experience;

2. An accountant's commitment to an employer, as determined by measuring the individual's attitude, intentions (i.e., decision to participate), and behavior (i.e., decision to produce), is inversely related to the extent of reality shock experienced.

Figure 1
Antecedents and Outcomes of
Reality Shock [From Dean, 1983]



Research Site

To investigate the above hypotheses, a longitudinal field survey was undertaken. The study was conducted within a single organization, the regional office of a large "Big 8" public accounting firm. During 1982, this office hired 162 accountants. These new employees were recent graduates holding undergraduate or advanced degrees with a concentration in accounting.

Procedure

Two questionnaires and a performance evaluation sheet were used. The purpose of the first questionnaire - administered on the first day of employment, was to assess the pre-employment expectations. The second questionnaire, distributed after one year's employment, was designed to measure the perceptions developed after one year of work experience. The questionnaires were administered under the direction of the researchers, and respondents were guaranteed anonymity.[1]

Performance measures were obtained from the subjects' supervisors.

The project was begun in January 1982. All accountants hired between January and October 1982 were surveyed on their first day at work, and a second time after one year's employment (that is, January through October 1983.) The performance data were also collected after one year's employment.

Complete data sets were obtained for 75 percent (n=122) of the accountants hired during 1982. A profile of the subjects is provided in Table 1.

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[1]The questionnaires incorporated the Job Diagnostic Survey [Hackman and Oldham, 1980]; the career facilitation items [Schneider and Dachler, 1978]; the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire [Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974]; and the intentions to quit items [Jackofsky, 1984]. The complete questionnaires and their scale reliabilities are included in Dean, 1984.

TABLE 1

Demographic Statistics of Respondents

Personal Characteristic	n=122
Age (Years)	22.8
Sex (percent male)	63.1
Marital Status (percent married)	23.8
Race (percent "white")	94.3
Social Background [1]	2.6
Prior Work Experience	
-Percent of Sample	15.6
-Duration (months)	30.2
Educational Background	
-Undergraduate	
. grade point average [2]	3.43
. accounting hours taken	31.1
-Graduate	
.percent with advanced degree	25.4
.grade point average [2]	3.47
.accounting hours taken	22.3

1. Social background was assessed using a modification of a formula developed by Hollingshead and Redlick [1958] which incorporates both the level of education and occupation of the respondent's parents. The Scale: 1 = upper, professional class; through 5 = lower, unskilled blue collar class.

2. The grade point average is computed on a 4-point scale, with 4.0 = A, 3.0 = B, etc.

Results

As predicted, the accountants experienced reality shock as their initial expectations were lowered by work experience. Table 2 lists the initial expectations of the accountants as measured on the first day at work, their perceptions of the same dimensions one year later, and the change in these perceptions (reality shock). On three of the eight job dimensions, and all seven of the affective responses, and the career facilitation measure the accountants reported significant levels of reality shock. (On just one job dimensions, task identity, reality was significantly "better" than initially expected.)

The results in Table 4 support the hypothesis that the extent of reality shock experienced does impact the employee's organizational commitment attitudes, intentions, and behavior. As predicted, the correlations between the reality shock variables and the three organizational commitment measures were negative, and in most cases significant.

The rationale behind the reality shock hypothesis was that new employees with realistic expectations would experience minimal reality shock and, therefore, be more committed to the organization. Similarly, the "met expectations" hypothesis with regard to Realistic Job Previews suggest that lowered expectations should be more easily met and, therefore, more satisfying [Dugoni and Ilgen, 1981]. To test this hypothesis, initial expectations and reality shock were correlated with scores on the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (attitudes), the intent to remain scale, and the performance scale (behavior).

TABLE 2

Expectations, Perceptions, and Reality Shock

Scale [1.]	Expectations (T1)		Perceptions (T2)		Reality Shock (T1 - T2)		Signif- a. icance
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t
Core Job Dimensions							
Skill Variety	5.26	0.80	5.10	1.02	0.16	1.16	1.52
Task Identity	3.89	1.07	4.41	1.22	-0.52	1.46	-3.94***
Task Significance	5.24	0.91	4.73	1.25	0.51	1.30	4.29***
Autonomy	4.18	0.95	4.39	1.04	-0.21	1.28	-1.75
Feedback from Job	4.87	0.92	4.56	1.22	0.31	1.32	2.57**
Supplementary Job Dimensions							
Feedback from Others	5.74	0.78	4.63	1.30	1.11	1.51	8.02***
Dealing with Others	6.34	0.57	6.28	0.72	0.06	0.07	0.81
Overall Motivating Potential	102.2	43.1	101.8	54.2	0.44	61.3	0.08
Affective Responses							
Overall Job Satisfaction	5.36	0.86	4.02	1.20	1.34	1.31	11.28***
Satisfaction with:							
Job Security	5.51	0.89	3.26	1.54	2.25	1.57	15.67***
Pay	5.70	0.93	4.59	1.43	1.11	1.28	9.52***
Co-workers	5.71	0.68	5.46	0.76	0.25	0.97	2.79**
Supervision	5.50	0.84	4.87	1.21	0.63	1.32	5.23***
Personal Growth	5.60	0.77	4.90	1.19	0.70	1.27	6.10***
Internal Work Motivation	5.99	0.44	5.83	0.59	0.16	0.63	2.76**
Career Facilitation	5.84	0.58	4.77	0.92	1.07	0.97	11.95***

a. paired T-Test, T1 with T2
** = $p < .01$
*** = $p < .001$

1. For definitions of each of these scales, see Table 3.

Table 3 Variable Definitions

Core Job Dimensions:		
Skill Variety	-	the extent to which the employee expects to use a variety of skills
Task Identity	-	the extent to which the employee expects to perform a whole and identifiable piece of work
Task Significance	-	the perceived importance of the employee's task
Autonomy	-	the freedom to work with close supervision
Feedback from Job	-	the amount of feedback provided from doing the job
Supplementary Job Dimensions:		
Feedback from Others	-	the amount of feedback received from other people in the workplace (e.g., co-workers supervisors)
Dealing with Others	-	the extent to which the job requires interaction with other people (e.g., co-workers, clients)
Overall Motivating Potential	-	a summary measure of the motivational potential of a job based upon the five core job dimensions.
Affective Responses:		
Overall Job Satisfaction	-	an overall measure of the extent to which an employee is satisfied with the job
Specific Satisfactions	-	the extent to which an employee is satisfied with (a) job security , (b) pay and other compensation, (c) peers and co-workers, (d) supervision, and (e) the opportunity for personal growth and development on the job
Internal Work Motivation	-	the extent to which an employee is self-motivated to perform
Career Facilitation	-	expectations that the individual has about his or her future career, including intra organization mobility, promotions, pay progressions, assistance with career planning, inter-organizational mobility, etc.

TABLE 4

Significant Correlations of Initial Expectations and Reality Shock with Commitment

Scale	Initial Expectations (T1)			Reality Shock (T1-T2)			Reality Shock Controlling for T1 [a]		
	OCQ[b]	Intent to Remain	Performance	OCQ [b]	Intent to Remain	Performance	OCQ[b]	Intent to Remain	Performance
Core Job Dimensions									
Skill Variety	.17*			-.33***	-.36***	-.22**	-.50***	-.49***	-.26**
Task Identity				-.18*			-.27**	-.28***	
Task Significance				-.37***	-.22**		-.41***	-.32***	
Autonomy	.18*			-.26**	-.16*	-.16*	-.45***	-.36***	
Feedback from Job				-.18*	-.22**		-.29***	-.26**	
Supplementary Job Dimensions									
Feedback from Others				-.31***	-.23**		-.39***	-.27**	
Dealing with Others					-.19**		-.18*	-.24**	-.19*
Overall Motivating Potential	.20**			-.31***	-.26**		-.49***	-.43***	
Affective Responses									
Overall Job Satisfaction	.20**			-.47***	-.67***	-.29***	-.62***	-.80***	-.27***
Satisfaction with:									
·Job Security				-.39***	-.38***		-.45***	-.45***	
·Pay		-.16*		-.40***	-.37***	-.27**	-.38***	-.37***	-.20**
·Co-workers				-.27**	-.26**		-.40***	-.37***	
·Supervision	.18*			-.35***	-.26**		-.47***	-.33***	
·Personal Growth	.23**			-.50***	-.44***	-.31***	-.64***	-.60***	-.27**
Internal Work Motivation	.26**			-.32***	-.27***		-.49***	-.36***	-.16*
Career Faciliation	.21**			-.42***	-.37***		-.56***	-.47***	

a. Partial Correlations removed the variance due to initial expectations
b. Organizational Commitment Questionnaire - measured attitudes
* = p .05
** = p .01
*** = p .001

To avoid the problems associated with difference scores, the relationship between reality shock and the various outcomes was tested using partial correlations, controlling for initial expectations.

As illustrated in Table 4, reality shock on each of the scales (job dimensions, affective responses, and career facilitation) was significantly correlated with commitment attitudes as measured by the OCQ and with commitment intentions (decision to participate). Fewer significant correlations were found between reality shock and actual job performance (decision to produce).

Personal Characteristics

The effect of various personal characteristics (age, sex, marital status, race, social background, and prior work experience) on organizational commitment was assessed. Of these, only age and social background were found to influence commitment. Age was significantly correlated with commitment attitudes as measured by the OCQ ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). Social class was correlated with the OCQ measure ($r = .18$, $p < .05$). These data suggest that older newly hired accountants are more committed than younger accountants, and that accountants from blue collar families have a higher degree of commitment than those from upper class, professional families. Overall, the personal characteristics of the subjects had only a minor effect on organizational commitment.

Implications for Personnel Professionals

The results of this research project show the importance of initial job expectations in influencing the organizational commitment of professionals. In practical terms, these findings suggest three strategies for building the organizational commitment of new employees. First, realistic job previews have been offered as one technique for establishing realistic expectations of job candidates [Wanous, 1980].

A second strategy is suggested by Dean [1983]. This strategy recognizes the importance of matching people with organizations. It would involve a selection technique - hiring only those job candidates with realistic expectations. This strategy would require the organization to identify those childhood experiences cultural influences, educational background, etc., which produce expectations consistent with organizational realities. In effect, the organization would screen out those potential employees with unrealistic expectations, and more likely to experience high reality shock.

Whereas the above strategies accept the job as a constant and attempts to hire employees with realistic expectations, a third strategy would be to change the job. This approach would involve changing the work experiences of new employees to better match what is expected by them. The authors recognize, however, that it is not often practical to change a job's content, a job's context, and the career opportunities associated with

a job in order to satisfy each employee's expectations.

Whatever strategy, or combination of strategies, is chosen, this research has shown the importance of the organization's active involvement in reducing reality shock and thus building organizational commitment.

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